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ABSTRACT

As the instructional leaders of the schools, principals have both the responsibility and the authority to bring about substantive improvements in their reading programs, their faculties, and ultimately in the reading achievement of the pupils in their charge. For this reason, they should seek constantly to upgrade their ability to supervise school reading programs. Principals can encourage effective reading instruction by being familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches most generally used to teach reading, including the directed reading lesson plan, the language experience approach, individualized reading, the sequential (systems) approach, and the eclectic approach that combines elements of the first four types. Administrative efforts in five specific areas also could produce positive changes in school reading instruction; these areas include improved teacher selection; improved supervision; more inservice training for teachers; more teacher participation in curriculum development and materials selection; and encouragement of teachers to improve their skills through workshops, conferences, and graduate study. (RL)

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READING AND THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

by Charles Sherwood, Ed.D.

Educational researchers have found many conditions that seem to play a part in deterring children from making normal progress in learning to read. Physical and intellectual handicaps, a low socio-economic level, and lack of parental concern are generally cited as factors that contribute to reading disability (Spache, 1976). Unfortunately, the school has little or no control over such impediments.

But educators themselves are hardly blameless. Cohen (1969) reviewed research on teaching reading and reported: "Every study of the level of instruction in American classrooms concludes that, in general, the instruction in reading is, at best, mediocre and often poor" (p. 257). In Mississippi, the 1976-1977 state-wide assessment program showed that pupil's performances in vocabulary and in reading comprehension were lower than expected in relation to their ability scores. (Mississippi Educational Assessment Program, 1977). Organizational patterns, grouping practices, emotional climate, and teaching methods appear to be causing a great many reading problems (Durkin, 1974a). These, at least to some degree, are the responsibility of the building principal.

Principals or superintendents are often misled by the claims of sales representatives into using their reading funds for programs, equipment and computerized testing services that teachers do not want and are reluctant to use. The decisions to purchase such materials are generally made with good intentions, but often reflect the administrators' lack of understanding of appropriate methods and materials for reading instruction. Advertising makes it appear that in every up-to-date school system reading is being taught by space-age technology. Exciting films and filmstrips have replaced dull books. Children learn to read with machines that blink or buzz or type out "Correct!" Stories are recorded for listening, complete with professional actors and sound effects. Monsters and superheroes survive challenges never dreamed of by Dick and Jane. High-pressure salesmen can make teachers and administrators feel that they are uninformed and out-of-date by pitches loaded with educational jargon.

The school principal owes it to his or her position to be informed about the research behind new materials and gadgets, so that he or she can

> remind teachers that although there are floods of new material for use in teaching reading, no one has made a breakthrough which will allow all teachers to teach all children to read. . . No reading program for an individual classroom can be purchased in a box or package (Rutledge, 1975, pp. 748-749).

The Importance of the Principal

The multi-million dollar reading studies sponsored by the U. S. Office of Education in the 1960's indicated that the performance of the classroom teacher was the single most significant variable in children's progress in learning to read (Bond & Dykstra, 1967). What was not investigated was the extent to which teachers' efforts were affected by their principals. Barnard and Hetzel (1976), both public school administrators in Arizona, wrote that:

> It is ironic that those who can change students' reading achievement scores the most are often ignored in the total effort of improving reading services for students. The key to the improvement of reading rests with the principal. By the very nature of the position, the principal is responsible for providing the impetus to improve the school reading program (p. 386).

A Los Angeles study involving twenty elementary schools with a high percentage of minority students found that reading progress was linked to the ability of administrators to recognize and encourage effective teaching in the classroom (Rand Corporation, 1976).

One of the outstanding authorities in reading, Durkin (1974b), commented: "As more and more elementary schools are visited, it becomes increasingly evident that school-wide excellence in reading instruction exists only when a principal has a very special concern for reading" (pp. 8-9).

The importance of the principal in the reading program was emphasized by Sanacore (1977). He reported:

> [The principal's] role as an instructional leader frequently determines the extent to which the programs are effectively initiated and implemented. The principal's positive leadership in reading-related matters is especially important, since a reading related school provides students with opportunities for success in other curricular areas (p. 312).

The encouragement of good teachers is certainly one of the most important functions of a successful elementary school principal. Teaching reading is almost always hard work, and there are times when the frustrations are many and the rewards are few. A brief commendation from a knowledgeable administrator can rejuvenate a tired teacher whose enthusiasm is beginning to wane. On the other hand, an authoritarian or excessively critical principal can damage the reading program by lowering the teachers' self-confidence. Avery (1972) pointed out that the area of administrator-teacher relationships was often neglected in both the education and selection of principals, resulting in a poor affective climate in many elementary schools. He commented:

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> Few educational researchers have been able to measure the effect of the principal's attitude on reading instruction as accurately as the first grade teacher who stated matter-of-factly, "Every time my principal walks into the classroom the temperature drops thirty degrees" (p. 13).

Supervising the Reading Program

Upgrading the ability of the principal to supervise the reading program can have a positive effect on school achievement. McHugh (1967), in a study of several California school districts, found that an improvement in reading achievement followed the training of principals in the leadership of the reading program. If he or she became an administrator after years of successful elementary classroom teaching, familiarity with methods and materials can make supervision pleasant and helpful. But if the principal never taught reading in an elementary school, lack of information can be severely detrimental to the program. McHugh (1972) summarized the problem.

> [The principal] probably has taken only one course in reading as an undergraduate many years ago. . . .The principal is further handicapped. . . .in that he has little or no understanding of primary-grade reading. . . .He tends to spend less time in primary grades than in intermediate grades. . . .The principal's plight is not of his making. If we are to be critical of this situation the last to be blamed might well be the principal (p. 164).

Most principals, visiting elementary classrooms unannounced, will observe lessons similar to the following. The teacher directs a group of from seven to ten children to come to the reading circle with their basal readers. Consulting a note written the previous day in the basal manual, she indicates the page for today's story. After a few moments are spent discussing the title and the picture on the first page, one child is chosen to begin oral reading. After a paragraph or two, or after the pupil makes some errors, the teacher selects another child and the process is repeated until the reading period is over. The children who are not reading aloud are told to "follow along" silently; some teachers make a point of calling on those pupils who do not appear to be "keeping up."

This is an example of the most common approach to teaching elementary school reading. It is usually called "round robin" oral reading, and reading specialists have campaigned against it for many years with remarkably little effect. In a study of college students' recollections of their own reading instruction, Artley (1975) found that round-robin oral reading was categorized again and again as a "negative experience." He wrote: "I know of no reading authority who would condone this type of activity."

Of course, few principals intend to promote or support reading lessons of this type, but lack of informed supervision can permit the continued existence of poor teaching.

Current Methods in Reading Instruction

How *should* reading be taught? This question has been debated for generations, without a definite answer. However, four different methods are in general use. Each has supporters among the country's reading specialists. Each approach also has strengths and weaknesses, which will be considered briefly.

The Directed Reading Lesson

School districts in Mississippi almost always select a basal reading series for elementary grade reading. The set of books is typically designed for the first six grades. It begins with a readiness book, which is intended to help the children develop their visual and auditory abilities. Matching objects, matching sounds, listening for rhyming words, and looking for small differences in pictures are activities used at the beginning of first grade. Letter recognition is taught, and some texts introduce letter sounds.

When the readiness materials have been completed, after six or eight weeks of school, children begin reading in the first pre-primer. Most basal series provide three pre-primers, a primer, and a first reader for the first year of school. The vocabulary is controlled, and new words are introduced a few at a time. Most publishers supply two basal readers at the second grade level, two at third, and one each at fourth, fifth, and sixth.

As indicated earlier, the basal reading series may be misused in round-robin oral reading. However, when it is used as the basis for Directed Reading Lessons, it can be an extremely effective approach to reading instruction.

The Directed Reading Lesson has several steps. First, the teacher pre-reads the section to be taught to decide whether it contains any concepts or ideas which may not be understood by the pupils. For example, rural children may not be familiar with high-rise apartments and elevators, while city youngsters may know very little about farm animals. If there are any gaps in the children's experiences, the teacher spends a few moments discussing the ideas they will encounter.

Next, the teacher introduces the new vocabulary words. These are written in sentences on the chalkboard to help the pupils remember them. With good readers, the teacher may urge them to use their skills to "decode" the new words; with less capable readers, he or she may simply pronounce the words.

The third step is to give the students a purpose for their reading. This is done by asking a question or two which can be answered only by reading the story. Then the children are given time for silent reading. In the early grades, the "silent" reading may consist of the children reading orally to themselves; the point is that they are not reading for anyone else.

When the pupils have finished reading the selection, the teacher asks questions about it. The children may be asked to find the answers in the book and volunteers are called on to read them aloud.

The teacher concludes the lesson with a follow-up activity. This might consist of an exercise to develop a particular skill, or one or more children could read the story aloud while the others listen (with their books shut). Sometimes a selection is dramatized by the class, or pupils might be allowed to draw pictures to illustrate the story.

The teaching method outlined above can be used effectively in any grade and in any subject. When used regularly, with materials at the right level, the Directed Reading Lesson consistently produces good readers.

The most significant problem with basal readers today is that they have become considerably more difficult. In 1960, the average first grade reading program contained about 350 different words which the children were expected to know by the end of the year. The basal readers currently in use have from 450 to 1000 words or more. Phonics skills are also introduced at a faster pace. Skills which were once taught in second grade now are found in the first grade program (Sherwood, 1975). Because of this, teachers find that some of their pupils cannot complete all of the work intended for their grade (Bernard & DeGracie, 1976). Efforts to push them more rapidly end in frustration and lack of mastery. When children skim through basal materials without learning them thoroughly, the deficit accumulates year by year. The result, as many schools have discovered, is sixth grade pupils who read at second and third grade levels.

The Language Experience Approach

Another method of teaching beginning reading is called the Language Experience Approach. This technique is based on the belief that children will learn to read faster and easier if their reading materials come directly from their own experiences, and in their own words and sentences (Pienaar, 1977).

At the lowest level, Language Experience reading may consist of little more than labels on objects around the classroom. "Table," "door," "wall," and "window" are easy for children to learn, because the objects are completely familiar. The ever-present association between the labels and the objects lets many pupils learn the words

without conscious effort. This kind of "reading" instruction is appropriate for kindergarten, or for parents to do at home in the pre-school years.

Many first grade teachers use another form of Language Experience reading as a way to introduce some of the most basic concepts. The teacher may use a classroom occurrence to generate dialogue with the children. After a few minutes of discussion, the teacher suggests that the class might like to write a story. Sentences are dictated by the children, and are written on the board by the teacher. The final story might look something like this:

We like pets.
Susan has a rabbit.
Billy has a dog.
Ann has a kitty.
Pets can play.
Pets are fun.
We like pets.

Because of their close personal involvement with the content of the story, many of the children will remember the words and will be able to "read" the sentences. This method is typically used in a group situation with volunteer readers. There is little pressure on individual pupils, and neither fear nor frustration is likely to result. And there are several valuable skills which can be developed with this activity. Non-reading children learn that writing is "talk written down." They learn that a word they say is written as a separate set of symbols on the chalkboard. They begin to understand that reading goes from left to right. And they find out that one reads from top to bottom. If, in addition, they learn a few words, that is a bonus.

Good teachers also use the Language Experience Approach in later grades to record group experiences. A field trip to a farm, the post office, a police station, or the fire station, will provide children with new ideas, new words, and a great deal of excitement. The pupils might dictate the following report:

We went to the fire station.
We saw red fire trucks.
We heard the siren and the bell.
We rode on a hook and ladder truck.
We wore fire helmets.
Firemen put out fires.
They are good helpers.
We like firemen.

Experience stories and records dictated by the class are often written on chart paper or tag board and saved for future reading by the pupils. This approach sparks interest in reading, which is later transferred to other reading materials.

There are some disadvantages to the Language Experience Approach as well. The lack of vocabulary control makes it difficult for many children to cope with the large number of new words they meet. This often happens with the story which follows a trip. Much new vocabulary is injected into the record, which will not be repeated in subsequent stories. And most children will forget words if they do not see them again and again.

If the Language Experience Approach is overused, many children will become bored. This is especially true of bright pupils, who want to read for new ideas and new information. Rereading their own stories begins to get monotonous after a few months.

Used sparingly, however, the method adds a new dimension to the school reading program. It is most effective when it supplements the directed reading lessons described earlier.

Individualized Reading

All silent reading is, of course, an individual process. However, Individualized Reading is also a method of teaching (Betts, 1973). In fact, two types are currently in use. The first, which is found mostly in remedial reading classes, uses kits of reading materials. The kits provide sequences of stories which are progressively more difficult. The teacher uses a placement test to find the beginning point for each pupil. During the reading period, each child reads the selection on his level, answers a series of comprehension questions about it and then checks (or the teacher checks) the answers with a key provided by the kit. As long as the child meets the standard for correct answers set by the teacher, he continues to progress through the kit. If his comprehension falls to an unacceptable level, he may be placed in easier material in another kit.

The classic method of Individualized Reading is library-based. Each child selects his own book and reads it silently at his own pace. The teacher holds a five to ten minute conference with each pupil once or twice a week. She keeps a record of how many pages each child has read, and asks questions about the story. The child may be encouraged to read aloud a part that he particularly liked, or that he just finished reading silently. During this oral reading, the teacher makes notes about any problems the child may be having. If several pupils have common deficiencies, the teacher may group them for instruction in the specific skills that they need.

Individualized Reading has the advantage of student interest in the materials to be read. Assuming that the school has an adequate library, a child may pursue an interest through a number of books. Typically, children in an Individualized Reading program read considerably more than comparable students in a basal reading program. It is not unusual for a good reader to complete two or three books a week during the reading periods.

But the disadvantages of Individualized Reading discourage most teachers from extensive use of the method. First, children are often poor judges of the reading level of library books. They may select books that are too easy or too difficult. Because the individual conferences are time-consuming, the teacher may not discover that a child is in an inappropriate book for several days. Also, skills instruction in the Individualized Reading program tends to be fragmented and disorganized. The lack of vocabulary control and repetition makes it difficult for many pupils to acquire a large sight vocabulary. And the comprehension questions asked by the teacher during the individual conference are frequently shallow "all-purpose" questions: "What do you like best about the story? Or "Who are the main characters in your book? Tell me about them." Few teachers have time to read all the books the children are reading, so any answer that sounds plausible is accepted.

Individualized Reading is most successful in two situations. As an addition to a more structured reading program, it provides practice in using the skills that the children are developing. As a total program, it works best with groups of children who have already mastered the basic reading skills and who need little more than encouragement to do extensive reading. Generally, these are students who read at or above the fourth grade level.

Systems Approaches

New in name but not in content, System Approaches provide reading instruction through a planned sequence of skills. Some are computerized, others are self-scoring, some require laborious work by the teacher. But the concept is usually the same. The reading process is divided into a number of separate skills. Depending on the publisher, the total may range from as few as seventy-five to more than five hundred. The children are iven a test over some or all of the skills. The teacher uses the results to determine the instructional needs of each pupil (Johnson & Pearson, 1975).

Many of the systems use a test-teach-retest pattern. For example, Susan's test might indicate that she was unable to apply the "silent *e* rule" in phonics. She would be assigned work with that skill, either individually or with a small group of children with the same deficiency. After practice with appropriate material, Susan would be retested. If she succeeded in using the phonics rule, the teacher would check off that skill on Susan's record sheet, and would then move to the next skill in the sequence.

A Systems Approach does ensure that every child will have a planned program of instruction in the basic reading skills, although the

basal reading programs also provide sequences of skills in their manuals, some teachers ignore them. Systems Approaches are supposed to be relatively "teacher-proof"; if the step-by-step directions are followed, every pupil will be taught every basic skill.

This author's experiences with Systems Approaches, however, have not been so positive. Some teachers become so preoccupied with isolated skills and record-keeping that they lose sight of the children themselves. Reading for enjoyment is submerged by a flood of worksheets. Pupils may become adept at matching sounds or underlining root words with little or no growth in their comprehension of longer narratives (Spache, 1976).

Another fallacy in most Systems Approaches is the belief that a child who has demonstrated a certain skill on a test needs no further work on that skill. But children need continued reinforcement of skills, preferably through their application in independent reading. Without regular practice, the skills will slip away within a month or two after the children have apparently learned them.

Eclectic Teaching of Reading

Many of the best reading teachers use a combination of methods in their classrooms. This is often referred to as Eclectic teaching; that is, the teacher selects activities from several different approaches to meet the needs of the students. For example, a teacher might use Directed Reading Lessons in the basal readers, supplemented by some systematic phonics instruction, and followed by a period of Individualized Reading. Language Experience techniques might be used to introduce beginners to reading and to get children started in creative writing. When carefully balanced, with adequate attention devoted to both skills instruction and sustained reading, a combination approach is most successful with a great majority of pupils.

Implications for Mississippi Principals

In recent years, declining scores on the annual Scholastic Aptitude Tests and court cases claiming educational malpractice have worried educators and politicians (Seretsky, 1973). As a result, there is a wide-spread movement toward competency-based promotion and graduation. Pipho (1977) found that sixteen states have established minimum competency standards. Interest has already been expressed by the Mississippi Legislature in setting minimum standards for high school graduation (Mabry, 1977). The Mississippi Educational Assessment Program's annual report (1977) suggested an academic audit of basic skills achievement to "provide product accountability and, with due process, might be incorporated into the state's existing school accreditation system" (p. 345). Pressures for improved instruction are being felt in many school districts.

As the instructional leaders of the schools, the principals have both the responsibility and the authority to bring about substantive improvements in their programs and their faculties, and, ultimately, in the reading achievement of the pupils in their charge. Administrative efforts in five specific areas could produce positive changes in school reading instruction. These are:

1. Improved teacher selection. The current teacher surplus gives administrators an opportunity to be selective in their choice of teachers. If hiring is based to a significant degree on candidates' preparation in and attitudes toward teaching reading, the program and the children will benefit.
2. Improved supervision. Principals and supervisors who know the procedures and components of good reading instruction will be far more likely to stimulate teachers to do their best. Poor management techniques, poor methods and inappropriate use of materials can hamper children's learning.
3. In-service training for teachers. New teachers have only begun to learn the skills of their profession, and experienced teachers need to have their knowledge and their enthusiasm up-graded. Effective in-service programs can accomplish both goals. However, the principal should be sure that teachers are not forced to endure, on their own time, interminable demonstrations of gadgets and gimmicks by hopeful salesmen. The resentment which follows such presentations far outweighs the value of the information gained.
4. Teacher participation in curriculum development and materials selection. When school policies and choices of texts and other materials are the result of democratic processes, the principal is not likely to find much resistance to improving the program. Professional people, to do their best, need to feel that they have a part in making decisions.
5. Encouragement of teachers to improve their skills through workshops, conferences, and graduate courses in reading.

Above all, the effective principal must make every effort to improve his or her own skills and knowledge in relation to the school reading program. Miller (1977) states the need succinctly:

> Leaders are quick to identify individuals and groups needing "updating," but seldom identify that need in themselves . . . Turnover of administrators is among the lowest of any educational group. Thus, if we are to bring about the changes required, those in present leadership positions must be the ones to do it (p. 31).

Despite the problems that are seen in public school reading programs today, the potential for improvement is excellent. Both teachers and principals understand that reading is the key to better education, and that the quality of this education will determine Mississippi's future.

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